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## The Study of the Process of How to Teach Writing

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Christian Scholarship Professor Essay  
Faith-based Pedagogy in the Writing Classroom

Helen L. Walker

April 15, 2009

Messiah College took its stand years ago not to make an artificial separation between faith and education when it chose its motto, “Rigorously Academic, Unapologetically Christian.” This choice was a response to an ongoing conversation at Christian colleges on how to reconcile what have historically been conflicting value systems: an academic education based on objectivism, holding that knowledge of reality is based on observed phenomena external to the mind, and a Christian education based on faith, where knowledge of some realities is internal and is based on unobservable phenomenon. We can see this conflict for educators through a metaphor of envisioning as expressed by education theorist Parker Palmer: “With the mind’s eye, we see a world of fact and reason. It is a cold and mechanical place, but we have built our world there. We open the eye of the heart and see another sight: a world warmed and transformed by the power of love, a vision of community beyond the mind’s capacity to see. We cannot forsake our hearts and yet we cannot abandon our minds” (xi-xii). Palmer’s metaphor points to a need for reconciliation between these two kinds of “sight,” if we are to be assured that our college is offering the education we want for our students. Teaching based on the theory of constructivism focused through a Christian lens rather than on a theory of objectivism can allow for this reconciliation.

A traditional view at some Christian colleges is to say that the “co-curricular half” deals with Christian education while the classroom is the domain of rigorous academics. Since I have been at Messiah College, however, voices have spoken against this split, saying that faith and learning should be integrated in “the academic half.” One attempt at a synthesis of the two

discrete parts of the motto is a required, senior capstone seminar with its charge to integrate faith and learning. Since I teach the capstone for English majors with a writing emphasis, ENGL 496, my charge, then, is to integrate faith and learning in this writing classroom.

To create my curriculum, I turned the charge into a question for myself that demanded an integrated answer: what would a course look like with its goal being growth in the rigor of pursuing and performing writing from the standpoint of one's personal faith? Answering this question has taken me on my own integrating journey leading to the curriculum which Writing Seminar students and I are presently implementing. This journey to the resulting faith-based pedagogy is the topic of this paper, my best attempt at the integration of faith and learning in the classroom.

For sixteen years, I was taught according to the assumptions of an objectivist epistemology, taught to look through Palmer's "mind's eye" and taught to squeeze the "heart's eye" tightly shut lest it interfere with my vision and my success as a student. We were all taught this where I grew up: that "all reality is objective, uninfluenced by emotion, surmise, or personal opinion, and external to the mind, and knowledge is reliably based on observed phenomenon (the definition of objectivism in *Webster's New Riverside Dictionary*). Authors Nancy Lester and Cynthia Onore of *Learning Change* posit that the mental construct by which "we define the nature of knowledge, and by that we mean what knowledge is, how people acquire it, and how we decide whether knowledge has been acquired or not has overarching power over what happens in the classroom" (6). Since the objectivist view holds that knowledge is an entity capable of being transmitted from one who knows to one who doesn't know, this put my own

teachers front and center as the authority, and the pedagogy they used was various forms of transmittal to passive receivers (the “banking concept of education” as defined by Paulo Freire 57-74). With my mind’s eye, I watched my teachers lecturing. I received well, and I was an excellent memorizer too. Along with the lectures were sessions of fill-in-the-blank answers by students who raised their hands to the teacher’s questions. I loved to raise my hand. I have an image of leaning forward on the desk top so I could wave my hand higher than those around me. Our answers were immediately evaluated as right, wrong, relevant or irrelevant by the teacher. At exam time, I wrote down and handed in what teachers had already told me. I was deemed a successful learner.

My teachers taught me not only the answers for tests, but also their epistemology and pedagogy of objectivism. I learned how to teach by watching how they did it. I learned that knowledge is fact, that the good teachers employ methods to get their students interested enough to listen to them, and then give good tests: ones whose grades show which students got it and which didn’t. This means that I would teach the way my teachers had taught me—unless I changed my mental construct. Yet this construct, that sees knowledge as objective and transmittable, is irreconcilable with a classroom whose goal is to integrate a learning process of both knowledge of an inner faith and knowledge of a particular discipline.

United States’ school practices based on an objectivist epistemology solidified before I was born. Since classroom learning is a social phenomenon, changes in the social structure of schools reinforced objectivist views out of which the curriculum emerged. Literacy theorist Frank Smith discusses the historical progression of these

changes of the last hundred years in *Between Hope and Havoc: Essays into Human Learning and Education*.

When we moved from the one-room schoolhouse, where everyone interacted and collaborated with everyone else, schools changed toward age and ability grouping. “Instead of learning mutual assistance, students learned to “‘keep up’ and if possible to ‘get ahead.’” Schools adopted experimental psychology’s scientific theory that efficient learning happened through “repetition and application.” Education turned its back on the social nature of learning and moved toward “efficient knowledge transmission from rigorous instructional organization and planning” (82).

Smith explains that after World War I, “Mass testing techniques were adopted from the armed services to rank students. Learning became comparative and competitive. Relationships between students, and between students and teachers, became even more tenuous and stratified.” With the introduction of systems analysis, behavioral engineering, and standardized instruction, measurable outcomes changed the teacher’s role dramatically. “Fundamental classroom decisions began to be made by people who could see neither the teachers nor the students involved. Cognitive science united psychologists, linguists, and philosophers with a view of the brain as an ‘information-processing device’ and thinking as ‘operations upon knowledge’” (83).

This progression of disconnection between learners, and between the learner and teacher, echoes and reinforces a construct that “portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know”(Palmer 51). Not just the emotions but any sort of inner life interferes with learning. In objectivism, “the intuition is derided as irrational, true feeling is dismissed

as sentimental, the imagination is seen as chaotic and unruly, and storytelling is labeled as personal and pointless”(52). As Palmer explains, there came to be a clear and irreconcilable split between the objectivist view and what I will call a faith-based view of the nature of truth, and where, how, and whether it can be found.

As much as I may have wanted to see through my heart’s eye to my world and to my own inner truth, my education said no. So I listened to my mind. If my emotions, my inner life, were interfering with my success in school, I cut them off. I kept my faith out of the classroom, as we were told to do, kept it private except in church or sometimes at home. If it felt unnatural when I was young, I learned the rules. What begins by feeling unnatural can become familiar enough to feel natural. Herein lies part of the power of tradition that makes a change of mental construct very difficult.

The fact of this irreconcilable split between the views on the nature of truth explains why, if I wanted to integrate faith and learning in my classroom, I could not teach the way I had been taught. Faith clearly locates truth as internal and personal rather than external and objective: “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). Furthermore, faith clearly locates itself with connection and relationship rather than with objectivity and disconnection: “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6).

Sixteen years was a long time for me to have soaked up objectivism in my classrooms, especially with my intense focus on succeeding in them; however, alongside this construct grew and is still growing another epistemology, constructivism.

Constructivism is the belief that knowledge is the active construction of meaning by each learner. From this perspective, the sense-making activities of learners are

primary. Knowledge is constructed inside the learner, comes into being by inner processes.

How, then, does a constructivist epistemology view the social dimension of classroom learning? Picture a classroom: each student present is constructing his/her own unique perceptions and images, making sense out of them from what happens in that classroom moment by moment, and this “sense” is their constructed knowledge. And, since classroom learning is a social act, even though individual knowledge is constructed internally, the exchange of constructions in the classroom among learners is a dynamic, expanding, transcending process where learning and growth happens; relationship becomes central to learning..

My own developing views of constructivism allowed me to understand that it was the journey I chose for myself that would guide me to where I would go. As a teacher most of my adult life, I was working not only on reconciling my Christianity to my personal life but to my teaching as well. This led me to the scholarship in composition pedagogy on the shift toward a “global spiritual sensibility” (Houston qtd in Schiller 41), the understanding that writing students can and should add a spiritual dimension to their meaning making. The years of participation in this scholarship moved me beyond the pull of tradition to my present faith-based pedagogy.

I understood from working with the definitions of a “spirit-based pedagogy,” as it was named by my friend Susan Schiller, that this is what I wanted my writing students to understand and practice: that knowledge is constructed from “going beyond, into a transcendent dimension” (Huebner 50). My students would enact a process “that allows [them] to enter the illuminated zone”(Swain 169).



Two tenets of a spirit-based pedagogy became central to me. The first is the importance of a connected, caring and trusting community of learners. For example, Dwayne Huebner explains why community is necessary:

The condition for experiencing the spiritual is vulnerability and accepting that one can be overpowered and transformed.... The experience itself is important. From these experiences an awareness of being vulnerable, open, and available for others, and the new is developed. To anchor this awareness in consciousness, a social fabric, a speaking and symbolic community, is required. (50-54)

Nel Noddings explains how an inner process of connecting with others can provide motivation for writing:

As part of the act of caring, an attitude of “receptivity” allows for “an invitation to see things from an alternative perspective. [When I] receive the other, I am totally with the other. The relation exactly as Buber has described it in *I and Thou*. The other “fills the firmament.”... There is also a motivational shift. My motive energy flows toward the other and perhaps toward his ends.... We are in a world of relation, having stepped out of the instrumental world...allowing ourselves to be transformed. (32-34)

From reading Noddings’ book *Caring* and attending workshops with her, I understood how a group environment of vulnerability and openness which encourages a desire for sharing relationships could lead to the creation of a written product with spiritual dimension, from participating in a process of creation with a spiritual dimension.

Another issue that became clear to me is that a spirit-based constructivist approach to teaching writing in essence privileges creative writing, or at least the creative process. Its focus is the dynamic, inner, transcendent process rather than, for example, memorizing and imitating external forms (called modes of writing in writing textbooks).

Reading *The Art of Possibility* helped me imagine this kind of spirit-based writing process coming out of what I facilitate in my classroom:

[Writers] dare to let go of the edge of themselves (121), actively surrendering their boundaries, ...connecting to all beyond, letting the force run through them, ...getting closer and closer to raw vulnerability,...a willingness to give up pride...to reveal a truth to others,...making the sacrifice...to bring others to a place of understanding. (89)

Reading Rudolf Steiner, especially *How to Know Higher Worlds*, also furthered my view of what it might look like:

Long before we have a clear perception of our progress, we have a vague feeling that we are on the right track. It comes down to giving our thoughts and feelings the right direction.... There develops in us a soul faculty—a force—compelling us to...learn the language of things, gain certainty in our observations. [We become] helpers of the world and humanity [who] pass through life bestowing blessing.  
(60-61)

Another scholar and my good friend, Stan Scott, was helpful in suggesting a spirit-based pedagogical tool. It is called *lectio divina*, following the Benedictine practice of slow sacred reading, and, even though he is talking about a way to read

poetry, he explains it in such a way that I imagined it as a model in Writing Seminar where students could “come into relation with Spirit through experience.” Or they could, through an experiential pedagogy, write in a way that would connect them to that part of them which is their faith, or integrate their faith with their writing. Here is how Stan put it:

Spirituality is not just a feeling or an abstract state of mind, but an *actual* experience. We can approach a poem in a way that allows it to awaken in us not just an aesthetic or cognitive response but a response that goes into a deeper dimension of the self, or consciousness, a dimension that historically has been called *Spirit*.... We gain knowledge of Spirit by coming into relation to it.... The key to finding *Spirit*, in a text as in oneself, is developing the power of attention and learning to be still.... We come to realize (discover the reality of) an experience that our personal relation with the text makes possible.... The act of reading gives birth to spiritual experience in us. (76-77)

Just as he describes what can happen with this spiritual approach to reading, such an approach could happen in the act of writing. I was convinced of it. This was becoming my image of an experiential-learning-based Writing Seminar.

I also credit Stan for reminding me of Simon Weil’s book *Waiting for God* which he connects to his use of *lectio divina* in the classroom. He quotes Weil as she defines prayer as devoting “all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God.” Her approach to the classroom is that school studies are for the purpose of “increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer” and that any “genuine

effort of the attention” is never wasted but that “it always has its effect on the spiritual plane” (qtd in Scott 77). I am reminded here too of Frederick Buechner’s final paragraph in his essay “Faith and Fiction”:

So pay attention. As a summation of all that I’ve ever had to say as a writer I’d for that. And as a talisman or motto for that journey in search of a homeland, which is what faith is, I’d settle for that too. (129)

Finding a pedagogy for learning to pay attention would also serve to integrate faith and writing. What about treating the ability to develop the power of attention as the main purpose of school, as Weil argues?

Through reading these authors and others, I also became very aware of parallels to Jesus’ life, as he journeyed through his own learning process on earth and particularly as he related to his disciples as teacher. Out of my own personal history, since I was growing toward belief in the possibility of integration, I asked myself one more question: What would a spirit-based pedagogy look like through a specifically Christian lens? The answer came from looking at Jesus’ life as a model.

I take from the Bible a view of Jesus moving through a human existence as a teacher of Christian truth. From the view of a constructivist epistemology, I study the way he constructed his life by moving through it. I study his choices and behaviors as a teacher and the experiences he facilitated for meaning making for his student disciples. I then set up a curriculum in which I provide meaning making experiences for my students. Jesus said that he was indeed “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Herein lies the final ingredient to be integrated into a spirit-based pedagogy for teaching writing to arrive at a faith-based Writing Seminar curriculum.

### 1) What was Jesus' relationship as teacher to his students?

“He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.... [He] humbled himself” (Philippians 2: 7-8). Jesus' humanity and his humility are important for two reasons: the first is that if we model Jesus as fully human, not super-human, the view of what can or cannot happen in the classroom changes. We must assume that Jesus is a model of a human being. For example, if I must be God in order to have a sense of the holy enter into the classroom in Writing Seminar, or for a sense of the holy to be present in the students' writing, then obviously that won't happen because I am not God. But if Jesus is a human model which we can realistically work toward, then we can consider realistically the results we want with him as our model.

The second reason that this is central to a new curriculum is in its positioning of the teacher to her students. Jesus took on the nature of a humble servant, not the authority/“god” figure. He “made himself nothing.” Even though Jesus spoke with ultimate authority, delivered the messages that Christians take as the most important information they have access to, he was not an authoritarian. He chose not to have the power position. This speaks strongly against a pedagogy where teacher is keeper and transmitter of all knowledge to her students, the objectivist classroom model. It speaks strongly for a relationship where teacher encourages students as the master of their own meaning making in the constructivist classroom.

### 1) Did he use an experiential learning model?

He clearly led his students through experiences. He, literally and figuratively, journeyed with them. He shared his messages and answered their questions, but his students usually didn't get the meaning until they figured it out through their own

experience. An example here is Peter discovering the difficulty of loyalty to Jesus (Matthew 26:35-28:17).

He spoke in a way that his students often found unclear because of paradox and metaphors which they didn't immediately understand; he left things open-ended and ambiguous and brought up "mysteries hidden since the creation of the world" (Matthew 13:35). In other words, he encouraged their own inner journeys.

He encouraged openness, listening, and paying attention to their experiential "classroom" as the way to learn the important meaning. For example, his repeated advice was "He who has ears, let him hear," suggesting that a deeper listening was the way to understanding what mattered, to understanding Truth (Matthew 11:15; 13:9; 13:23; 13:43; 15:10).

The essence of experiential learning is to learn by doing. Jesus taught them how to heal by empowering them to actually go out and do the healing. (Luke 9: 1-6, Mark 6: 7, ).

2) Did he use a relational model?

He promoted activities that brought him and his disciples closer together : "family" and ceremonial activities like eating together (Luke 5:29), the washing of feet (John 13: 4-5), communion (Luke 22:14-20), sharing comfortable, enjoyable, and not just work-related space (Mark 6:31 ).

He was in loving relationship with his disciples: he practiced and promoted love and non-competitiveness. Here he tells them to "Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other" (John 13:34), and he also encouraged trust (John 14:1).

A summation of the relationships between teacher and student and between student and student is most clear here:

You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different.

Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others. (Mark 10: 42-45)

### **The Writing Seminar Curriculum**

Two assumptions underlie the construction of the work of the course. First, as a constructivist curriculum, it will privilege “creative” process and product over writing using traditional form. This will encourage intense engagement in the active inner creation of meaning, for example, writing that emerges through an inner journey of self discovery. With faith thrown into the mix, the journey necessitates exploring with the imagination what is unseen and unknown seeking a form of transcendence. (The rubric for assessing creativity in Appendix B explains more on this.) The second regards the growth stage in which I find many of my senior students. They are in a faith development stage similar to Jesus at twelve—when he was breaking away from his parents’ teachings to find his own identity. As fully human, Jesus was saying that he had to discover for himself how to “be about his father’s business,” just as my students are searching for their own particular faith. They resist language or behavior that seems to them “religious,” “churchy,” or simplistic and therefore untrue and something to reject. They are not interested in biblical references. Their discussions often lead to their

intense inner faith struggles. The distinction the students make is similar to Jesus': "The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the Scriptures [but] don't follow their [own] example. For they don't practice what they preach" (Matthew 23:2-3) . My students seem not to be interested in listening to "teachers of religious law," with the notion of obedience to religious law being especially odious. And being so young, they don't have much idea how hard it is to practice what one preaches. So, as seems appropriate, this curriculum does not talk about what Jesus preaches. Instead, the emphasis is on practice.

#### Course Goals and Objectives:

- 1) Students will discover their own faith-based writing process and do faith-based writing.
- 2) Students will learn to privilege truth over style.
- 3) Students will ponder the "mysteries hidden since the creation of the world," explore the Great Dialogue and the Mysteries that take a lifetime of living to find one's own answers
- 4) Students will learn that caring relationships between student and teacher and between students increase their abilities to do faith-based writing

#### Learning Strategies for Goal One:

An experiential learning pedagogy has as its central premise that experiencing and then reflecting on that experience is the best teacher. This is a pattern of doing, then resting by reflecting and sharing, before doing again, which is informed by (or a response to) the previous sharing—a spiraling methodology.



Frederick Buechner's quotation "Nothing is harder to make real than holiness" is a metaphor for the primary strategy to accomplish Goal One. I tell them that, as writing emphasis majors who are charged with integrating their faith with their discipline, we will write pieces of holy writing and share them. I tell them that, from taking this journey together, we will attempt to discover what this integration looks like and how to do it. We will learn by doing. I tell them I will do it with them, all of us partners exploring together. (See the assignment Holy Writing Response Project in Appendix A.)

This strategy is based on the view that spirituality is an "an actual experience." In the constructivist way, we gain knowledge of the spiritual by coming into relation to a deeper dimension of consciousness. This connective experience gives birth to, using the language of our assignments, a holy process out of which we do holy writing. The strategy also holds that proof comes from experience, and that we recognize the truth of our experience through reflection.

The key to finding this spiritual dimension and moving into it is developing the power of attention. Thus, a second strategy is repeated exercise in "daily-ness practice," which follows a progression of paying attention to something that normally goes unnoticed: paying attention, opening, connecting, and loving. (See the assignment Daily-ness Practice: A Way to Explore Holiness in Appendix A.)

Learning Strategies for Goal Two:

This goal is introduced in the syllabus through the quotation credited to Joan of Arc before she died as a martyr: "Even though I saw the executioner and the fire, I could not say anything but what I have said."

Our first reading, “Honesty: Be True to Love,” Chapter 3 in *All About Love: New Visions* by bell hooks, addresses this goal as one of the Mysteries of the course. As well, the issue of truth in writing comes up consistently in peer review and genre discussion of differences in fiction and creative non fiction, one of the most complex and thorny issues in contemporary writing. When truth telling in writing is connected to work toward “holy writing,” the tendency is that it is weighted as important.

Learning Strategies for Goal Three:

The syllabus introduces this goal with Rainer Maria Rilke’s quotation,

I beg you, dear sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (35)

The readings were chosen to stir the discussion-sharing pot. They are not about writing, not even about the creative process. They are about “the whole person,” as Jesus modeled the whole person, yet none are specifically Christian articles. They are controversial from the get go, to explore the Great Dialogue and the Mysteries, to “go deep,” to stretch what can relate to our discipline even as far as stretching to all value-driven thought, to speak in riddles that only those who have ears can hear, to make it clear in discussing them that there are no right answers, no wrong answers. Nothing was

hard to understand in the articles, only hard to do: connecting love to radical truth telling, reaching wholeness as a wounded healer, meditating on a piece of reading until one experiences *spirit* in it. (See the list of readings in Appendix A and a discussion of student response to them.)

#### Learning Strategies for Goal Four:

We hold Writing Seminar in Issachar's Loft. We sit in a circle of couches, pillows, bean bag chairs, or carpet. For the four Tuesdays that we do Holy Writing Sharing, we establish a ceremony: someone lights a "holy candle" and puts it in the middle of the circle and blows it out when we are done; between each reading we pass our copies of papers around in silence, so each reading is book-ended this way. We have a Holy Easter Party which is silly and poignant and has good food. We drink tea when we want to. We have a weekend retreat at the teacher's home where everyone shares their Work in Progress and gets feedback and eats and sleeps together. We work at establishing trust, openness, and an atmosphere of honest and humility—which includes the teacher.

Another strategy to promote Goal Four's caring relationships addresses the most firmly entrenched relationship construct in the objectivist classroom, the relationship between teacher and student with teacher as authority figure. Even with a constructivist epistemology in other areas, grades give the teacher the authority, make her the knower and the determiner of who correctly receives what she knows. Jesus' relationship with his disciples was one of a loving fellow journeyer, albeit a leader, who metaphorically "gave everyone an A," for effort and for being a top notch creation of a human being. To

help unlearn the autocratic construct, I assign *The Art of Possibility*, Chapter 3, “Giving an A.”

The authors Rosamund and Benjamin Zander point out that the main purpose of grades is to compare one student with another, which makes them competitive and puts a strain on relationships and “too often consigns students to a solitary journey.” In giving an A, everyone transforms, teacher as well as student: “it is a shift in attitude that transports your relationships from the world of measurement into the universe of possibility” (26). What follows is a description, perhaps extreme but also recognizable from my experience in a rigorously academic environment where there can be only so many “best students”: “We encourage them to develop good practice habits...to travel abroad to gain firsthand experience...and also throw them into a maelstrom of competition, subservience, and status seeking. And from this arena we expect them to perform with warmth, nobility, playfulness, generosity, reverence, sensitivity, and love” (31).

For Messiah students, the list of hopeful expectations would be the similar one of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Zander goes on to say that an obsession with competition makes it difficult to take the “necessary risks with themselves” to make mistakes, when it is through making mistakes “we can begin to notice what needs attention” (31). Noticing what needs attention is an essential, initial step in learning how to pay attention, one of the skills essential to the goals of this course.

The authors also explain what I recognize as true for myself: “it is only to a person to whom you have [metaphorically] granted the A that you will *really listen*, and it is in that rare instance when you have *ears for another person* that you can learn from them” (42).

In this change of attitude of believing each of us is “an A,” standards of excellence remain just as important. Standards help by “defining the range of knowledge students must master.” The change, though, is that “giving the A allows the teacher to line up with her students in their efforts to produce the outcome, rather than lining up with the standards against them. The freely granted A (literal or figurative) expresses a vision of partnership, teamwork, and relationship”(33) -- a central tenet of Writing Seminar. It also allows for the freedom to pay attention to, especially, what we can learn from mistakes. And it is in working our way through fixing mistakes or solving problems that we make breakthroughs in constructing new meanings.

(See the assignment for “Giving an A” in Appendix A)

Yet another strategy for Goal Four, promoting caring relationship, is to experience writing as gift giving and receiving. When the students are writing for each other, the more concrete relationship here is between classmates. However, the concept of caring for one’s audience may hopefully be extended to the abstract, absent reader.

(See the assignment “Cherished Object” in Appendix A.)

#### Assessment:

As with any curriculum, assessment of the learning goals is necessary, to know if students are learning successfully. And assessing inner processes is difficult. The scope

of this paper does not include a comprehensive assessment of the goals; however, initial work has been done and is included in Appendix B. I have developed an instrument not yet validated for measuring creativity as evidenced in writing. As well, since what assessors need are windows through which they can view inner processes, students' reflections on their process is one successful way to see, when they are combined with other instruments. Also included in Appendix B are some examples of reflections from this year's Writing Seminar students. In light of the goals of the course, they are interesting as partial evidence of success.

To summarize, I believe my Writing Seminar is a tentatively successful model of a capstone course which integrates faith and learning. It is such because it has evolved out of an epistemology which is relational, emphasizes the dynamic interplay among class members, teacher, and class content, and we are all paying attention, listening, sharing, "leaning in" to the truth. We are privileging sacred space, love, generosity of spirit—and the holy act of creativity.

An interesting awareness about this journey I am on is that I am personally believing more in the integration of learning faith and writing. As I do so, as I more fully trust myself to live the questions and feel Joan of Arc's conviction about truth and know Buechner is right about embodying holiness, my students seem to more fully engage in this curriculum and be changed by it. Their writing becomes better, and the classroom as a social community becomes stronger.

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## Appendix A

### Holy writing Response Project

Purpose: Being responsive to each other and to ideas is a necessary part of learning, being a community, and working on one's own projects. The response project is the best exploratory form I can offer you, as writers, toward understanding the connection between faith and writing. Doing these four writings will serve as our forum together to explore what holy writing is and how to do it.

#### Criteria for Response Project:

- 1) all members of the community will bring in a response to the presentation of the previous week. Each may respond to one individual's response, a general theme in a group of responses, conversation that arose out of the responses, or a topic that occurred to you in relation to the responses. Make photocopies of this response so that everyone in the class receives a copy. Me too.
- 2) The response may take any form. There is no length requirement.
- 3) Responses will be read aloud in class each Tuesday they are due, for 4 Tuesdays.
- 4) We will decide as a community how to respond as we listen to the work.
- 5) For the first Tuesday, your writing will be a starting attempt at doing holy writing.

## Daily-ness Practice: A Way to Explore Holiness

1) A progression: Paying attention.... Opening..... Connecting.... Loving.

We enter into...what? The mystery? The nature of things? The world in a grain of Sand? (Blake). The world in (fill in the blank with what you are paying attention to each day for one week).

2) Repetition is a rhythm: breathing, always in out in out, until the stopping. Even the stopping is a part of a repetition if we look at it through the large lens of the whole—a repetition of births and deaths. Repetition is basically what we mean by daily-ness,. The mundane, that which so repeats itself in our lives that it becomes boring or unnoticeable or no longer special.

So we will practice repetition too. Pay attention to, open to, connect to, and then perhaps loving happens.

Our goal in this practice is to open ourselves up to some daily-ness intentionally and see what happens. Choose some thing that will allow you to repeat your action of paying attention for one week. After each “session,” record your thoughts, feelings, observations with free writing, with you as audience. The free writing helps with intentionality and repetition.

3) We will share the results of our one week of daily-ness practice on [date] with a 5-10- minute presentation reflecting on the highlights.

### The Zanders’ “Giving an A” Assignment

After assigning the reading, I give them a writing assignment for Day 2, taken loosely from the Zanders:

Write me a letter dated the last day of the semester, which begins with

“Dear Helen Walker, I got my A because . . . , and in this letter you are to tell, in as much detail as you can, the story of what will have happened to you by May that is in line with this extraordinary grade.

You are to place yourself in the future, looking back, and report on all the insights you acquired and milestones you attained during the semester as if those accomplishments were already in the past. Everything must be written in the past tense. Phrases such as “I hope,” “I intend,” or “I will” must not appear. You may if you wish mention specific goals reached, but I am especially interested in the person you will have become by May. I am interested in the attitude, feelings, and world view of the person who will have done all you wished to do or become everything you wanted to be. I want you to fall passionately in love with the person you are describing in your letter. (27-28)

On Day 2, I collect the letter to hand back on final exam day. We discuss whether we should take the Zanders’ idea literally or figuratively. They decide literally. I am relieved because I want this journey together to be as real as we can make it where we really construct meaning and pieces of writing together based on the model Jesus practiced as he really walked on the earth.

### The Cherished Object Writing Assignment (Day 2)

Students each bring in a “cherished object” of theirs. From the pile, each chooses one other than his own, not knowing whose it is or what its story is. Their assignment is to create a story about this object from their generous-spirited, empathetic, and intuitive imagination to share aloud and then give as a gift to the owner of the cherished object. So they traverse a shadowed landscape in this writing experience. It is unknown and filled with the need to step sensitively, since they must pay attention to a stranger’s cherished object. They must pay courteous if not loving attention to it. How much more this may matter if the stranger turns out to be a friend. It is the landscape of gift giving. What can they give that another will perceive as a precious gift? That they perceive as a gift worthy of giving?

### Readings:

--Chaim Potok's novel *My Name is Asher Lev*. It is a 369-page, extended metaphor of an artistic journey. Students frame the reading experience with open-ended, reflective questions: What is a writer artist? Am I a writer artist? Do I want to be a writer artist? How do I or can I or should I fit my parents into my writing life? How does my environment fit with me as writing (friends, school, church, etc.)? What about God? What about my will? My personality? What about the issue of mentors? Teachers? My responsibility is to.....whom? What? What are my fears surrounding writing? What is an "effective artistic process"? Why do I write?

The writing assignment for *My Name is Asher Lev*

Use reading and writing about this novel as an experience for learning about yourself as writer. Reflect on the above questions, along with any others that emerged for you, for 3 to 5 pages.

Consider this too: the Private/Public question: Since you are using this paper to explore whatever issues came up in reading *Asher Lev* which are helpful for you to explore, the audience for your writing is you. But try this (you don't have to): have two subheadings: Private and Public. Private is for you to explore, knowing that no one will "judge you," put you in some box, and you are doing it to help you articulate yourself to become more self aware. Public is what of your own connections and thoughts you would like to share in writing, out of being generous, knowing that one person's story can be a gift to another.

–The Packet containing 4 essays or chapters: Chapter 3 “Honesty: Be True to Love” in bell hooks’ *All About Love: New Visions*; Bill Moyer’s interview with Rachel Remen from *Healing and the Mind* entitled “Wholeness”; Stan Scott’s “Poetry and the Art of Meditation: Going behind the Symbols”; and selections from Rob Brezney’s book *Pronoia*.

Here is a little of what happened. The chapter on love was first. They seemed to quickly grasp that I had no knowledge to transmit, that the article was a voice to respond to, a riddle that served as a starting place to not solve but to go beyond. The topic of Wholeness: this was an even bigger mystery than the first. They did a little bit of “skeptical analysis” but then began to engage in questions and response to each other out of experience. The concept of a wounded healer was new, mysterious enough for wonder.

The new concept of lectio divina sparked questions about what their own writing should do. What is holy writing? What is the purpose? What does the relational unity of writer to reader look like? Does one do lectio divina as preparation to create? A definition actually emerged of a writing process which lovingly focuses on the subject or object of the writing in order to love it and allow the journey of writing to be one of transcendence. It is a term some students use now as if it were a writing term.

*Pronoia*: they mostly didn’t like this article. Its view of life was too positive while still being too hip, flip, perhaps making fun of too much. That style was supposed to be reserved for hip cynics, like the contemporary writers some of them liked. This author Rob Brezney discussed the place of gratitude, grace, hope. Audience questions emerged. When in a process do we care about audience? How much is too much?

Regarding the quality of the discussion, they warmed up. They liked not having to like the articles. Or sometimes liked liking them. They seemed to like not being neutral, and they seemed to like discussing not just for a teacher. I still talked more than my equal share, but mostly because I liked to discuss these articles, instead of feeling compelled to speak as the resident expert or to ask all the questions because students wouldn't.

The large writing project of the course: The Work-in-Progress

Choose a genre that you have strong writing experience and study in. This project is to take you to a new level of development in a genre you have already developed a love for and a sense of rigor in.

Choose a project that is wider in scope than you figure you can finish in one semester, hence a work-in-progress concept. It is fine that you will finish the semester knowing that you will continue to refine it, complete it, do more work before sending it off to get readers.

Working with a writing group is a big part of this work—to learn to trust, depend on, be generous to, and receive generosity from the other members.

We will have a weekend overnight retreat at my house in May where we will eat, sleep, etc, and share your WIP projects together.



## Appendix B

### A Rubric for Assessing Creativity as Evidenced in Writing

The difficulty of understanding creativity, defining quality levels of it, or assessing its presence or absence in some sort of analytical way is problematic. Others have used metaphors like trying to understand the motion of a top by grabbing hold of it and stopping it—or like understanding a person or a cat or any other living creature by looking at a photograph. What I think is possible to do is to set up a loose framework, from a discussion by Jerome Bruner which includes traits of creativity. These traits make sense as part of the creative process that I personally experience, and also as the results which I recognize as present or absent in my students' writing. They seem “holdable” if seen as part of the movement through a particular piece of writing; the quality of its creativity can be implied by its result in print..

What follows is a developing assessment instrument on Creativity as Evidenced in Writing created from Jerome Bruner's definitions of qualities of the creative process in “The Conditions of Creativity” from *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*. The instrument involves scoring for “effective surprise,” defined as “metaphoric artifice, juxtaposition and illuminating honesty” accompanied by “cognitive economy—[which is when] a seemingly limited symbol over a range of experience spreads its power “ (14).

#### 1) Evidence of Quality #1

Surprise :”strikes one with wonder or astonishment—with a quality of obviousness, producing a shock of recognition following which there is no longer astonishment” (18-19).

2) Evidence of Quality #2 (note: C below, metaphoric effectiveness, comes closest to that found in writing)

3 kinds of effectiveness: A) predictive effectiveness: “yields high

predictive value in its wake

(e.g., sets up a predictive pattern (19))

B) formal effectiveness: “an ordering of elements in such a way that one

sees relationships not evident before, groupings that were

before not present, ways of putting things together not

before within reach. Consistency or harmony or depth of relationship is the result” (19)

C) metaphoric effectiveness: “connecting domains of

experience that were before apart, but with the form of

connectedness that has the discipline of art. For example

connectedness as visionary—leaping beyond systematic

placement, exploring connection that before were

unsuspected” (20)

Note: all 3 kinds of effectiveness concern “Fruitful combinations: —“combinational activity, a playing of things in new perspectives.

3) Evidence of Quality #3:

The writer’s “emotional sensibility,” defined as “invention through harmony of forms, his/her intuitive familiarity to judge the fitness of the combination” (21). For example,

“since a picture lives only through him who looks at it, the artist must speak to the

human condition of the beholder to attain effective surprise.... The artist must be close

enough to these conditions in himself, so they may guide his choice among combinations, provide him with the genuine” (22).

#### 4) Evidence of Quality #4:

Success through the exercise of technique combined with inspiration (23).

(Note: A, B, C, & D are evidences of quality #4.)

A) Evidence of a” willingness to divorce oneself from the obvious”: detachment from existing form—along with a sense of “caring, a deep need to understand something, to master a technique, to re-render a meaning”; a detachment from existing forms in the interest of commitment. Disengagement from that which exists conventionally and deep engagement in what writer constructs to replace it (23-24).

B) Evidence of a willingness and ability to let one’s impulses express themselves in one’s life through one’s work. Because this grows with use, there is a tapping of sources of imagery and symbolism, or a degree of habitual attention, that would otherwise not be available” (24).

C) Evidence of a dispassionate state of working: “a love of form”involving a respect for materials, a courtesy or etiquette toward the object of the writer’s effort.

D) Evidence of the “Zeigarnik Completion Tendency”—when a watershed was reached, the task then had a structure that began to require completeness. The object takes over when freedom to be dominated by the object is present. There is a sense of service to the object. For example, we externalize a product of our own thoughts, treat it as “out there,” which permits it to develop its

own beginning, its own autonomy, coming to serve it, as if the relationship permitted the emergence of more unconscious impulse, more material not readily accessible" (25-6).

5) The piece as a symbol which is a source of energy, a "moral force."

Written Reflection on Process, by students in this semester's Writing Seminar

Our charge was to figure out what "Holy Writing" is by doing it, since that is what I proposed we do when we integrate writing with our faith. This included a charge to try to figure out how we do it so that we can repeat it and get better at doing it. The students wrote reflectively after their last two Holy Writing assignments. The questions were "What is the process of Holy Writing: how do you do it?"; "What is Holy Writing, now that you've been doing it?"; and "Did you get better at it?" Using these responses to partially assess their writing and their processes, my view is that they were accomplishing the goals of the curriculum.

Question 1: How do I do Holy Writing?

—Since I only know myself, my own experience, anything significant has to be drawn out of the depth of my own feelings. I was hoping that I could transcend by connecting with an emotion we all feel."

—"Our pieces in conversation with each other somehow contributed to each of our pieces' holiness."

—"I had to write it. It was true to myself. It was real to my heart."

—"Wrestling with the mystery, groping for honesty."

—"The holy writing of my peers motivated me to make people laugh—at the story rather than my wit."

--"I concentrated on one place in my life that resonates holy. It's my sacred, my peace."

—Question from a haiku writer: "Can holiness be found in less thought? Or only great thought?"

–“I stretched myself to try to write as real as possible—with h honesty, to write what I really heard, saw, noticed.”

–“My writing must reflect me. I said, “I’m sorry, this is what you are going to get” and opened my skin and showed what was really there. And what was there was a little love, yes, but stuck in globs of self-indulgence.”

–“It was a holy experience because I believed in myself and my gift.”

## II What is Holy Writing?

–“Everyone comes to the circle. Holiness is the acknowledgment and acceptance of diversity.”

–“Something gets to the core of a person’s soul if it is holy writing.”

–“A piece worthy of lectio devina.”

--“Holy writing is not written. Holy writing is read. People read holiness into something.”

–“An honest and imaginative attempt to unabashedly exist in one’s writing.”

–“Honestly depicting humanity in the struggle to understand others and ourselves.”

–“Thoughtful piece of purposeful and honest writing that tugs at our common humanity.”

–“I wrote the truth and the truth is one of the holiest things I can think of.”

–“Holy writing is finding that beauty in life—vulnerable and true and hopeful.”

“A human attempt to transcend human-ness either by embracing the transcendent (i.e. God) or by striking at a “universal” emotion, idea or experience. Holy writing moves beyond itself into the lives of others and/or the Divine.”

### III. What does growth in Holy Writing look like?

–“I don’t know if my writing got better, but my process did.”

–“My Holy Writing not so much progressed but expanded.”

–“The biggest part of these assignments was the expansion of my understanding of what writing actually is. I feel like I “see” my fellow writers more clearly now, see beauty in all of them in a deep way that defies petty differences in viewpoint and personality. It makes me appreciate God’s love for us if I can so deeply love a group of people I hardly know with such intensity.

–“I tried to be more honest. I am ready and willing to be wrong and at the same time ready to fight for my beliefs.”

–(about his last holy writing) “This idea just wouldn’t let me rest. I pushed myself harder simply by not allowing an idea I liked to get away.”

We did not talk about what they were to do or get from doing the holy writing, except to know what it was we were doing; instead, they did the writing and went through the process to arrive at a “holy process” for “holy writing.” Their responses were not mimicking correct answers given by the teacher. I can not say, however, that they did not intuit my hopes for answers. I was, after all, their audience. But perhaps this kind of intuitive work is part of the creative and constructivist learning necessary to good writing.

Notes:

1 *Learning Change* by Lester and Onore does an excellent job discussing impediments to change in education. I recommend reading this fuller discussion, beyond the scope of this paper.)

2. More formal structures, for example the established modes of writing, concentrate on an external process of imitating already-established, traditional structure. Let me emphasize, however, that by concentrating on creativity, I in no way mean to denigrate the position of the traditional modes in the academy.

3. I recommend reading Chapter 3 in its entirety as beneficial for understanding this radical idea of “giving an A.” I also recommend the entire book as a foundation for integrating rigor and faith. The Zanders’ students so clearly exhibit the excellence which arises from the integration that it is hard to resist not transferring their strategies to another discipline.

4. The Zanders suggest that the message “Do it right. My way.” trains students to focus on doing what they need to do to please the teachers and even on “how much they can get away with” (34). A reflection one student wrote this semester after one of his papers suggests that giving the A to him was successful in leading him to write for his own excellence, to write for making mistakes in order to notice what needs attention: *I wrote for a few hours on a subject that is pertinent to my upbringing, playing basketball with black people. As a white person, I was trying to draw out that reconciliation of racism needs to be a joint effort through my personal experience, but unfortunately I couldn't get it to go anywhere. I was also scared to reveal that part of my life. It feels outdated even to me, but I dearly loved that part of my life. Anyway, I stopped but intend*



*to return to the piece. Instead I went back to a piece from years ago that I felt was holy then and still do today. It needed tinkering, and I thinking pushing toward holiness is the tinkering. After finishing up this piece, I am once again firm that I want to write and push holy writing even more with these characters.*

Of course we can't be certain that his already given "A" made any difference to his effort and exploration here, but this is at least not the process of a writer who is performing to please a teacher or focusing on how much he can get away with.

#### 5. Dee Coulter: about rigor

Two things to consider are, first, a definition of "academic rigor" as a term to use alongside our more frequently used term of "excellence" (often in criteria for an "A" on a particular paper). The second is criteria for standards of excellence for artistic creativity as evidenced in creative writing.

Interestingly and, perhaps, tragically if we consider Messiah's motto, "rigor" is defined in *Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary* as "strictness or sternness; hardship; a cruel or severe act" The word "rigorous" continues with "harsh; extremely accurate; precise." The question emerges whether we really want to be "rigorously" academic. We must ask ourselves if we condone the historical view that "real learning" must be serious. If students are enjoying themselves, if they are strongly engaged and even passionate, then something is wrong in the classroom. Should we stay with the assumption that I was raised with, and I know that many of my current students were also raised with, that if fun is involved, then the time spent must not be as important to real learning as when things are serious, boring or not?

I would like to entertain a different view of rigor, the ability to “aim rigor” that Dee Coulter develops in her talk “The Inner Dynamics of Creativity.” Rigor here is the “quality of a disciplined and joyous focus” on a learning task, one that, once experienced, can be “aimed” toward whatever needs to be learned. We can use part of the dictionary definition—“extremely accurate; precise”— for the nature of the aiming, but the rest of the synonyms are as far away from Coulter’s description as one can get. I bring it up here because it shows a way of looking at academic strength or excellence that is very close to the hopeful result (and perhaps synthesis) of a faith-based pedagogy.

She calls her rigor a state of mind. Again, one that once developed through experience of learning something in this state of mind, can be “aimed” at something else to be learned. She describes this state of being further: being “in continuous practice of a developing skill that has become a quest”; “a joyous discipline”; an “effortless kind of effort”; “carrying a fundamental question below the surface” and [to use body, heart, mind metaphors] digesting it, breathing with it, and questing after an understanding/completion of it. There is a “chemistry” about it; it is not “forced practice, and doesn’t use adrenaline.” One of her metaphors for rigor is “prayer without ceasing” which is Simone Weil’s goal of paying attention which is, or should be, the practiced goal of all school studies. This too is a lens from which Messiah could easily reconcile the two sides of its motto.